

Agamben's state of exception – or if Agamben's concept needs a more global rethinking in the current situation.

Asya Karaseva   
 Center for Arctic Social Studies  
 European University at Saint Petersburg 191187  
 St Petersburg  
 Russia  
[akarasyova@eu.spb.ru](mailto:akarasyova@eu.spb.ru)

## References

- Agamben, G. 2005. *State of exception*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.  
 Rigi, J. 2012. 'The corrupt state of exception: Agamben in the light of Putin', *Social Analysis* 56: 69–88.

ANNA KAWALEC

# COVID-19 as the primary agent

An anthropological theory of social nexus designed to explain relationships of the social world was proposed by the British anthropologist Alfred Gell nearly 25 years ago (Gell 1998). He attributed the causes of interpersonal relations to two groups of social agents. Primary agents forge the intentional and morally responsible bonds that link them with recipients. While secondary agents sustain and activate those relationships, they may be human as well as non-human, e.g. animals, plants or inanimate objects (Gell was chiefly preoccupied with works of art).

Although the idea of the world as a collection of various types of agents is now a commonplace, the impact of Western anthropocentrism on how the boundary between humans and non-humans is drawn remains profound, establishing humans as the rulers of the world – often attentive, sometimes tyrant or light-minded. While this anthropocentric mindset of average Europeans, or those 'colonised', prevails, it is being revised under the impact of COVID-19, commonly perceived as a social agent. Media outlets report it not just as a mere extension of human agency, but as the primary social agent – the 'invisible enemy'. Thus, the worn-out Western world order is being reversed: COVID-19 is instituted as the primary agent, intentionally affecting and framing the ensuing activities of the other secondary agents, including humans whose intentional agency unwaveringly succumbs to the social agency of the virus.

The world-wide deterioration, or occasionally an improvement, of physical and mental health conditions, high mortality rates, upcoming economic recession – these

are arresting impacts of the virus on individuals, communities and institutions. COVID-19 affects and circumscribes not only individuals who may behave selflessly towards those in need, or at least by social distancing protect themselves and others, but also those who – *au contraire* – profit from the fear of others or recklessly risk life, whether their own or that of others.

The turnaround of the predominantly anthropocentric Western worldview by deferring to COVID-19 as the primary social agent – with human individuals and communities (including economy, entertainment, spirituality, etc.) framed in their existence and operation as secondary agents (like, in Gell's example, land mines of Pol Pot's soldiers being agents of the evil intent) – may nevertheless be a chance to free this worldview from the myth of anthropocentrism.

The anticipated ecological disasters have opened the view of humans as the rulers of the world to doubt. Now mounting concern is being voiced as the discoveries of global virology indicate that the natural order of the increasingly frequent pandemics in the coming future is inevitable (see Hatfill *et al.* 2019). Still, the perplexing question remains: Are we, Westerners, able to translate this view, sounding like a slogan, into the everyday activities of human individuals and communities? It seems that our attitudes during COVID-19 pandemics will verify our projection of the world and of our future.

Anna Kawalec 

Department of Epistemology

Institute of Philosophy

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin 20-950

Lublin

Poland

kawalec@kul.pl

## References

Gell, A. 1998. *Art and agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hatfill, S. J., R. J. Coullahan and J. J. Walsh Jr 2019. *Three seconds until midnight*. Asymmetrical Biodiversity Studies and Observation Group.

ILAN KELMAN

# COVID-19: what is the disaster?

The COVID-19 pandemic conforms to key baseline conclusions which have emerged from disaster anthropology over past decades. First, that natural disasters rarely exist, because disasters are social, arising from a combination of hazard and vulnerability,